

Pinellas County Summer Gardening 101

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It's May and the weather is still pleasant... for now. Soon we will be battling hot summer sun, bugs, humidity, and torrential rains every afternoon. These conditions present several challenges for the home gardener, but there are things you can do now to prepare your garden (and yourself) for the heat.



Coleus, photo UF/IFAS,
Okeechobee County

If you use **annuals** in your landscape you probably know by now that many of them don't tolerate the Florida heat very well. Just because a plant is being sold in local garden centers does not necessarily mean it's the right time to plant them here in Florida. However, there are several annual plants that take our temps in stride. They include salvia, torenia, wax begonia, coleus, and ornamental peppers. When shopping for annuals choose compact plants with healthy leaves, good color, and lots of flower buds (they don't have to be in bloom at the time of purchase). For more information about gardening with annuals in Florida:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/MG/MG31900.pdf>.

Since annuals are seasonal they should make up focal areas in the garden, but not too much space, as they require a lot of energy and resources for such a short life-span. Right now is also a great time to plan new **perennial plantings**, including trees, palms, shrubs, and groundcovers. If you have a plan at the ready you can be prepared to install once the rainy season starts- then you won't need to water as often yourself. Just remember that if you plant something before you go on vacation you should ask a friend or neighbor to care for it while you are gone. For more information on establishing new trees and shrubs: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP11200.pdf>.



Basil, photo UF/IFAS

But that's not all you can do this time of the year. You can also plant some **herbs** that like the heat such as basil, Mexican tarragon, and rosemary. Since some herbs are annuals and some are perennials remember to group them accordingly so you won't be disturbing the perennials when replanting the annuals. Many herbs are also suited to planting in containers- but you must remember that those plants in containers will dry out faster than those in the ground and will need more irrigation attention.

For more information about growing herbs in your Florida garden:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/VH/VH02000.pdf>.



Sweet potato flowers, photo Forest & Kim Starr, Hear.org

If you think your new herbs might get lonely out there, don't hesitate to try your hand at **vegetable gardening**. But (and this is a biggie) you can't plant the same veggies in the summer that you can up north. Our hot temps just won't work with many of the usual veggies, but there are several crops you can grow here in the heat including okra, southern pea, and sweet potato. For more information about vegetable gardening in Florida, including suggested crops and their planting dates:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/VH/VH02100.pdf>.

Summer (June, July and August are great) is also a good time to **solarize your vegetable garden**, so you can add this to your summer gardening plan. What does that mean? Well, this one prep can help reduce soil pests and even kill weed seeds, making your garden more successful throughout the fall gardening season. Solarizing involves harnessing the heat of the sun by covering the soil with clear plastic and is most effective in the summer months. To solarize, you want to prepare your soil with any amendments such as compost or manures before you begin. Make sure your garden is clear of rocks, twigs, weeds, and other debris. Till the soil to at least 6 inches to make sure the heat will penetrate deeply enough to be effective. The day after a good rain or irrigation is best for applying the clear plastic sheeting over the soil. Lay sheets of clear plastic over the soil and bury the edges to keep it in place. **Clear plastic is the only kind that will be effective- do not use black.** Finally, leave plastic in place for at least 6 weeks. For more info on solarizing your garden, visit "Introduction to Soil Solarization" at:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/IN/IN85600.pdf>.



Codominant stem failure after wind storm, photo UF/IFAS

A discussion of summer garden preps wouldn't be complete without a mention of hurricane season. Now is your last chance to **prepare for hurricane season by checking trees for damaged or weak branches and prune if needed**. Be sure to hire an ISA (International Society of Arboriculture) certified arborist to do this work- they are trained to care for trees and continually participate in ongoing education to maintain this certification. This can help lengthen the life of your trees and minimize the chance of property damage.

To find a certified arborist near you, visit the ISA website tool to locate a tree professional: http://www.isaarbor.com/faca/findArborist.aspx?utm_source=homepageclicks&utm_medium=homepagebox&utm_campaign=IAmA.

Last, but definitely not least, **make sure to watch out for your own health in the heat**. Slow down, dress for summer, do not get too much sun, drink water, do not drink alcoholic beverages, and spend more time in air-conditioned places. The University of Florida Extension has a great webpage for heat safety that everyone should read before it gets too hot:

http://extension.ifas.ufl.edu/hot_topics/agriculture/heat_stress.html. Be safe and have a great summer!